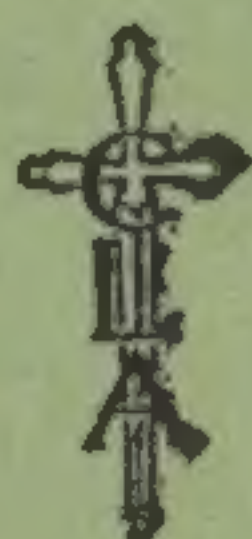


WHITSUNDAY

by

HAROLD RILEY



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WHITSUNDAY

The Church Year

WHITSUNDAY is the climax of the first half of the Church's year. At Advent we think of the preparation of the world for the coming of the Saviour in his Incarnation, and of our own need of preparation for his coming to us with his grace in this life and finally in his second coming at the end of the world. At Christmas we remember his birth of a pure virgin at Bethlehem. At Easter, after the days of sorrow for his passion and death, we "come to the glory of his resurrection," and after the great Forty Days of his risen life on earth, we commemorate on Ascension Day his triumphal entry into heaven. Then for a "novena," or nine days of prayer, we prepare ourselves as the Apostles did at this time, for the outpouring of the Holy Ghost, the great event we celebrate on Whitsunday.

The Day of Pentecost

Like Easter Day, Whitsunday has replaced for Christians a feast of the old Jewish religion. The Passover of the Jews has given place to the celebration of the death and resurrection of "Christ our Passover"; and Whitsunday has taken the place of the old observance of Pentecost. A day that was set aside for rejoicing and thankfulness for earthly blessings has become a day of rejoicing for the gift of the Holy Spirit, which our heavenly Father gives "to them that ask him." The day of Pentecost was one of three days when by the Jewish law all the people of Israel were expected to be present for the Temple services. In practice this was not found possible for all the people; some would no doubt be able to attend all the three feasts; others, especially those living in the Holy Land, would at least go to Jerusalem for the great day of the Passover, as we know that our Lady and St. Joseph did

(see *St Luke* ii.41). As the Passover fell so early in the year, when navigation was both difficult and dangerous, many who had to make long journeys and cross the sea found that the feast of Pentecost provided a more convenient occasion for their pilgrimage.

The Greek word "Pentecost" means "fiftieth," for the feast was the fiftieth day after the offering of the first sheaf of the harvest at the Passover. It is also called the Feast of Weeks, because it fell "a week of weeks" (that is, seven weeks) after the earlier feast. On it the first two loaves of the new corn were offered to God—the first-fruits of the harvest now completed. The Christian festival is the day of the offering of the first-fruits of the harvest of souls gathered by the Church of God (see *Acts* ii.41).

The First Whitsunday

St. Luke's account of the coming of the Holy Spirit, in the second chapter of the *Acts of the Apostles*, vividly brings before us the character of the day as it was observed under the old dispensation. There were, he tells us, "dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven." They belonged to the wide "Dispersion" of the Jews throughout the known world, and a list of the countries from which they came is given. The Christian disciples had probably attended at the Temple in the early morning for the offering of the first-fruits; they then met together "in one place" to pray, as others would be meeting in the many synagogues in Jerusalem. It was at this gathering together that the expectation of the disciples was rewarded, and the "promise of the Father" fulfilled.

The account of what happened cannot be better given than in the simple and graphic account of the *Acts of the Apostles* (ii.2 ff), "And suddenly there

came from heaven a sound as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues (R.V. tongues parting asunder) like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance." With the outward signs of the presence of God, the wind and the fire, came the inward conviction of the outpouring of the Holy Ghost, and in the new power given to them they began to speak the wonderful works of God, and to preach to the people.

Until this time there had been a band of disciples, united in allegiance to our blessed Lord ; now they became the Church in the full sense of the word—the Body of Christ indwelt by his Holy Spirit. The new Church was yet only a tiny body, but by the baptism of those who were converted at the preaching of the Apostles it began immediately to grow in a wonderful way.

The Birthday of the Church

As Whitsunday is the birthday of the Church, it is instructive to note how the characteristics of its full life were already to be seen. We describe the Church as "one, holy, catholic and apostolic," and all these marks are immediately apparent. The new Church was *one*—the new unity of those who were already joined together in a common faith and loyalty came from the one Spirit who began to dwell in them ; it was *holy*, for the Holy Spirit of God had been poured out upon them, and was beginning his work of sanctification through the Church ; it was *catholic*, to include all nations and to be preached in all tongues, as those present on this day had heard in their own tongues the wonderful works of God ; and it was *apostolic*, with the Apostles as its foundation members and rulers, and with an

apostolic mission which it began already to fulfil.

Whitsuntide Services

Our English name "Whitsunday" perhaps comes from the association of the day with the white robes of those anciently baptised at the feast; but the colour we most observe in Church is not white, but red. Red is the colour of fire, and the hangings of the altar and the vestments of the priest are meant to remind us of the fire of the Holy Spirit, the symbol of the charity, the warmth and the light that he came to shed upon us.

The *Collect* is an ancient prayer in which we ask that as at this time God of old taught the hearts of his faithful people by sending his Holy Spirit, so even now we may through the same Spirit, who is the Spirit of wisdom, "have a right judgment in all things"; and that as he is the Paraclete (that is, our Advocate and Comforter) we may ever "rejoice in his holy comfort." Every word in this simple prayer is significant.

The *Epistle* (or rather the *Lesson* that on this day replaces a reading from one of the New Testament Epistles) is St. Luke's account of the coming of the Holy Ghost (*Acts* ii.1-12). The first proclamation of the Gospel is a foreshadowing of its subsequent proclamation even in lands not then known, as the gift of the Spirit to the Apostolic band is the beginning of God's perpetual outpouring of grace on the Christian Church.

Between the Epistle and the Gospel, according to ancient custom, there is sung at this festival, as at a few others, a metrical hymn or *Sequence*. That for Whitsuntide is the beautiful hymn *Veni Sancte Spiritus* ("Come, thou holy Paraclete," English Hymnal 155) which has been known as the "Golden Sequence." John Mason Neale's English version is a not unsuccessful attempt to convey the character of the old Latin words of an anonymous

poet of the thirteenth century. In this hymn we pray for the gifts of the Holy Spirit, recognising our dependence on him for all grace and virtue.

The *Gospel* (*St John* xvi. 15-31) gives us part of our Lord's own teaching about the Holy Spirit. He is "another Comforter," "the Spirit of truth," "the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name," Our Lord teaches us that through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, he too is with us, and his Father also. The world neither sees nor knows the Holy Spirit, and cannot receive him, but he dwells with the Church and is the source of its life.

The recitation of the *Nicene Creed* is not of course a feature of this festival only, but the clauses that deal with our faith in the Holy Ghost have a special significance at Whitsuntide. After our prayer for a right judgment, and our hearing the story of the descent of the Holy Ghost, and when we have pondered on our Lord's teaching in the Gospel, the proclamation of our faith in him "who with the Father and Son together is worshipped and glorified" comes with an added significance.

One other feature of the Mass of the feast calls for comment. With some other days, Whitsunday has a *Proper Preface*, an added section to the words that introduce the *Sanctus*. As we draw near to the time of the Consecration, we are once more reminded by the words of the liturgy how according to the true promise of Christ the Holy Ghost came down of old, and how we also have been brought out of darkness and error into the clear light and true knowledge of God. It is in virtue of our Christian privilege of membership in the Catholic Church that we make our offering to God, and we do well to remember the Spirit who has conferred it upon us, as we approach the most sacred moments of the eucharistic rite.

Whitsunday is one of the feasts that is given special dignity by the observance of an *Octave*; that

is, the observance is maintained for the following week, and does not end on the day itself. In this instance, however, the Octave ends on the seventh day, as the following Sunday is set aside as the feast of the most Holy Trinity—Trinity Sunday.

Devotion to the Holy Ghost

It is at Whitsuntide especially that the need of devotion to the Holy Ghost is urged upon us, but our devotion at this time ought to be the climax of the devotion of our whole year, and not a substitute for it. It is too often true that those who pray with devotion to their Father in heaven, and to his incarnate Son, are negligent in prayer to the Holy Spirit. Devotion to the Holy Spirit will teach us to think aright of the Church, the Body of Christ in which he dwells, and will forward our own sanctification, as we are temples of the Holy Ghost. Especially should we pray for the gifts of the Holy Spirit of which Isaiah speaks (*Isaiah* xi.2); and that we may bring forth the fruits of the Spirit of which the Apostle speaks (*Galatians* v. 22-23). Among our daily prayers we might well include the hymn *Veni Creator Spiritus* ("Come, Holy Ghost, our souls inspire," *English Hymnal* 153) the only metrical hymn that is included in the Book of Common Prayer.

Our religion must not be one of outward observance only, but a consecration of the heart and will. One of the effective safeguards for ensuring that we worship God "in spirit and in truth" will be our sense of dependence on the Spirit of God, and this will be best fostered by fervent prayer to him.

"Come, Holy Ghost, and fill the hearts of thy faithful people, and kindle in them the fire of thy love."